

Public Spaces as Contested Terrains

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What is covered?

- Public spaces and the community
- Definition of public spaces
- Global context within which to locate the discourse and practice of public spaces
- What is wrong with our public spaces today
- What our are aspirations for city's public spaces
- How we propose to bring this into reality
- Conclusion

Public space and community

- There is a symbiotic relationship between public space and a community.
- Essentially, our thesis is that no public space exists without a community and the corollary is also true that there is no viable and sustainable community without public space
- It takes a public space to create a community and a community to create a public space
- In short: public spaces are about people and the meeting of their needs – social, economic, environmental, cultural, spiritual and historical

Contestations about the notion of public space

- There is a lot of agreement about the description of public space:
 - “the public is not only a region of social life located apart from the realm of family and close friends, but also the realm of acquaintances and strangers”.
 - The defining characteristics of urban public space are proximity, diversity, and accessibility
 - May refer to different physical environs such as parks, public streets, cemeteries, sportsfields or stadia, cultural and recreational venues, libraries and bus and taxi stops, and places of worship, places of shopping, tourism and leisure, museums, etc.
- However, public space in the modern city is charged with controversy and contestation
- Peter G. Goheen identifies two contrasting assessments of the significance of public spaces to the conduct of public life in the modern city

First assessment

- Proceeds from a premise that the public sphere has been radically devalued as a powerful social and political ideal in the modern city
- In this context, the interest of the citizenry in public space has diminished as it has withdrawn from active participation in debates on public issues
- In this view public spaces in the modern city are to be feared, even when they are full of people

Second assessment

- Emphasises the continuing significance of public space as a preferred arena where groups of every description can achieve public visibility, seek recognition and make demands
- Recognises the dynamic interplay between politics and public spaces, which are in constant flux
- Appreciates that public spaces are subject to renegotiations whether public or private and susceptible to decline and recline

Changing all round context

- Re-imagining public spaces takes place within seismic changes:
 - Global tilt in the balance of power from North to South
 - Increase at the rate at which the world is urbanising – think of billions of people trying to eke out a living in the impoverished districts of the megacities of the South
 - Neoliberal view that government is inefficient than the private – hence the rise in gated communities
 - Dualism between the rich and poor
 - Rise in environmental degradation and risk of climate change

Impact of global changes

- Mixed back of impacts: opportunities and risks
- Very importantly, there is need for innovation and resilience in how cities are being managed, including re-imagining public spaces
- Refracting our urban public spaces require a lot more thinking and creativity and maximisation of and leveraging on existing resources
- But there is a need for conceptual clarity about what we are trying to change and where the change must move to otherwise we expose our ourselves to previous limitations and mistakes

What's wrong with our public spaces?

- Spatial segregation and exclusion
- Disjuncture between where people live and where jobs are located
- Mirror colonial and apartheid past and exclusionary and laden with superior-inferior complexes
- Backlog in terms of the provision public spaces
- Developable land is in short supply and resides in the hands of private owners

Principles of creating great community places (Project for Public Spaces)

- The community is an expert – tap on local talents and assets to create ownership in the public space project
- create space, not a design – take care of physical details that are welcoming, seating and landscaping, pedestrian circulation, relations with retail, sports and culture
- Look for partners
- have a vision
- You are never finished – needs will change, therefore adapt to change to build great spaces

Power of 10

- Any great place itself needs to offer at least 10 things or reasons to be there
- These may include a place to sit, playgrounds to enjoy, art to touch, music to hear, food to eat, history to experience, and people to meet, spot to walk or run for fitness purposes, etc.

How are cities beginning to respond?

- Renaming of public spaces
- Provision of interim services within informal settlements
- Implementation of Integrated Rapid Transport Plans
- Densification strategies for human settlements
- Urban and inner city renewal strategies
- Built Environment Performance Plans focused on integration zones

Challenges

- Implementation models that favour speed, quality, innovations and cost effectiveness
- Resource mobilisation
- Asset management strategies

Conclusion

- Hope that this Learning Exchange will provide pointers and answer questions on what is being implemented elsewhere, what works and what doesn't
- The key is that we must embrace the change, adapt to it and seek to influence its future trajectory